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ABSTRACT

A study examined the use of time reserved for formal reading instruction in elementary schools. Subjects were 36 elementary classroom teachers--12 each from grades 1, 3, and 5--in 8 suburban schools. Specific reading instruction behaviors for each teacher were observed during two complete periods of the regularly scheduled reading classes. Teacher behaviors were identified as (1) comprehension instruction (four specific types were identified), (2) vocabulary instruction, (3) word recognition instruction, (4) teacher-directed oral reading, (5) teacher-directed silent reading, (6) teacher reading to students, and (7) noninstructional or transitional activities. The data were coded in seconds on an observational check list, and each time a new teacher behavior occurred, the time and type of activity were noted. A single summary table was compiled from the individual teacher data. Results showed that teachers generally spend about 25% of total reading instruction time teaching comprehension skills, 20% of the time teaching word recognition skills, 16% directing silent reading, and 13% directing oral reading. (Tables of results and a list of 14 references are included.) (AEW)

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THE USE OF TIME IN FORMAL READING INSTRUCTION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The last decade of research in reading has provided educators with a valuable body of knowledge about effective classroom reading instruction. This recent research has helped educators rethink the research of the late 1960's and early 1970's which suggested that the home and the community--and not the teacher or the school--made all of the difference in students' achievement. As a result of this research, educators have again become interested in the impact that effective instruction can have on students' learning and achievement. The quality and quantity of this research as well as the replication of many of the major results has helped us clarify our thinking about how teachers structure reading instruction. However, there is still a great deal to be learned about what teachers consider to be appropriate reading instruction and how they implement these ideas in formal reading instruction.

Previous research on formal reading instruction in elementary classrooms has generated concerns about the quantity and quality of such instruction. Langer (1984) questioned the extent to which research findings from human learning and cognition have had an impact on literacy instruction in schools. She noted the abundance of seatwork and paperwork. She also noted relatively little thoughtful interaction between teachers and students, between students and students, or between students and the ideas about which they read or write. Stuezel and Allington (1983) discuss the isolation of teachers as they plan their classroom instruction. This isolation might have some bearing on the fact that research results find their way into classroom instruction only very slowly and to a very small degree. Findings from the National Assessment of Educational progress (1981) suggest that while students seem to be acquiring the necessary basic skills associated with literacy, there is little emphasis being placed upon the instruction of higher level, critical thinking skills. Summarizing a number of studies that have examined the use of language in instructional

groups, Parker (1984) suggests that teachers spend little time in engaging students' higher psychological functions. In studies of the use of instructional time in language arts classes Applebee and Langer (1984) found that only two minutes in every fifty minutes of language arts instruction was spent in allowing children to interpret what they were reading, and only three per cent of the time was spent in writing anything longer than one sentence. Allington (1983) has attributed the difficulties of low aptitude readers to differential instruction, arguing that high-aptitude readers become better readers because they get more opportunity to read connected text fluently than low aptitude readers. Loring (1986) found that teachers do use very different techniques during formal reading instruction if they perceive that the students they are working with are good or poor readers. In a now classic observational study, Durkin (1979) reported the following results: 1. Less than one percent of the teachers' time was devoted to comprehension instruction during formal reading instruction 2. the time which was devoted to comprehension instruction was used predominately for comprehension assessment; 3. teachers taught word recognition skills rather than comprehension skills, and; 4. teachers were primarily assignment givers and checkers. Hodges (1980) questioned both Durkin's definition of comprehension and the way in which she operationalized it in her scheme for categorizing teaching behavior. However, in a follow-up study, Kurth and Greenlaw (1981) found evidence of many of the same instructional patterns reported by Durkin, and their results substantiated the major findings of Durkin's study. Specifically, Kurth and Greenlaw found that: 1. teachers spend the greatest portion of their reading instruction time in teaching phonics and word recognition skills; 2. when comprehension was taught, it was generally taught on a one-to-one basis rather than as part of direct instruction to a group of children; 3. an average of 19 per cent of the instructional time was spent in non-instructional activities; and 4. although teachers grouped for reading instruction, these groupings generally were not used to individualize instruction to meet pupil's needs.

During the time which has elapsed since the previous studies, much discussion of the contexts of school based literacy has occurred in education at both the national and state levels. In certain states, mandates for curricular change have come from the state boards of education. These mandates have dictated both the types of instruction and the amount of time which is to be spent in reading instruction. Many states have published lists of essential curricular elements in reading and have mandated certain state wide mastery testing programs. It was hypothesized that this type of state mandate for reading instruction would affect the type of instruction done during formal reading classes.

Thus, the purpose of this observational study was to describe the use made of instructional time during formal reading instruction in elementary.

PROCEDURE

Subjects

The subjects for this study were 36 elementary classroom teachers, all female, twelve each from grades one, three, and five, in eight suburban elementary schools. These teachers were randomly chosen from a pool of 62 first-, third-, and fifth-grade teachers in three school districts who had volunteered to let an observer visit their classroom during formal reading instruction. Teachers who volunteered were given a gift of books for their classroom. Thus any findings can only be generalized to teachers who were willing to be observed during reading instruction.

Observational Techniques

Each of the teachers was observed during two complete periods of the regularly scheduled reading classes. In most instances, formal reading instruction was scheduled for sixty to seventy five minutes each morning. Each teacher was observed for the entire scheduled reading period. In no instance was a teacher observed for less than 110 minutes

during the two days of observation, and the longest observation was 170 minutes in two days of observation.

The observational focus was the specific teacher behavior during formal reading instruction. Teacher behaviors were identified as: a. comprehension instruction (four types) b. vocabulary (word meaning) instruction; c. word recognition instruction; d. teacher directed oral reading; e. teacher directed silent reading; f. teacher read to students; and g. non-instructional or transitional activities. The specific types of comprehension teaching were identified as a. direct explanation of comprehension; b. assessment of comprehension; c. assignment of comprehension; and d. application of comprehension skills. Direct explanation of comprehension was operationally defined as teaching a strategy for performing some comprehension task, such as explaining the process used for identifying the main idea (Durkin, 1977; Durr, 1987). Comprehension assessment was defined as asking questions to determine whether the student understood the material which had been read. Comprehension application was defined as practicing a comprehension skill which had just ben taught; and comprehension assignment was defined as giving children a definite comprehension task to perform at a later time.

The data was coded in seconds on an observational check list. Each time a new teacher behavior occurred, the time and type of activity was noted. One observer collected the data on all 36 subjects.

Data Analysis

The number of seconds for each teacher behavior was tallied, and the percentage of the total teaching time spent on each teacher behavior was calculated. The data was analyzed separately for each teacher and then grouped for analysis by grade levels, and then grouped for a single summary table.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data for First Grade Teachers showed that an average of 15 per cent of the instructional time during the formal reading instruction was spent in some form of comprehension instruction; 6 per cent of the instructional time was spent in teaching vocabulary meanings; 28 per cent of the time was spent teaching word recognition skills; 17 per cent of the time was spent in silent reading practice; 14 per cent of the time was spent in oral reading; 6 per cent of the time was spent reading to the children; and 14 per cent of the time was spent in transitional or non-instructional activities. Of the 15 per cent of formal reading instruction spent teaching comprehension, 84 per cent was spent on comprehension assessment; 8 per cent on comprehension application; 6 per cent on comprehension assignment; and 0 per cent on comprehension explanation. These means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1.

The analysis of the data for Third Grade Teachers showed that an average of 21 per cent of the instructional time during the formal reading instruction was spent in some form of comprehension instruction; 9 per cent of the instructional time was spent in teaching vocabulary meanings; 19 per cent of the time was spent teaching word recognition skills; 17 per cent of the time was spent in silent reading practice; 15 per cent of the time was spent in oral reading; 3 per cent of the time was spent reading to the children; and 16 per cent of the time was spent in transitional or non-instructional activities. Of the 21 per cent of formal reading instruction spent teaching comprehension, 92 per cent was spent on comprehension assessment; 2 per cent on comprehension application; 6 per cent on comprehension assignment; and 0 per cent on comprehension explanation. These means and standard deviations are shown in Table 2.

The analysis of the data for Fifth Grade Teachers showed that an average of 35 per cent of the instructional time during the formal reading instruction was spent in some form of

comprehension instruction; 17 per cent of the instructional time was spent in teaching vocabulary meanings; 11 per cent of the time was spent teaching word recognition skills; 5 per cent of the time was spent in silent reading practice; 17 per cent of the time was spent in oral reading; 0 per cent of the time was spent reading to the children; and 15 per cent of the time was spent in transitional or non-instructional activities. Of the 35 per cent of formal reading instruction spent teaching comprehension, 75 per cent was spent on comprehension assessment; 13 per cent on comprehension application; 6 per cent on comprehension assignment; and 6 per cent on comprehension explanation. These means and standard deviations are shown in Table 3.

The analysis of the data for all Teachers showed that an average of 23.6 per cent of the instructional time during the formal reading instruction was spent in some form of comprehension instruction; 10.6 per cent of the instructional time was spent in teaching vocabulary meanings; 19.3 per cent of the time was spent teaching word recognition skills; 13.0 per cent of the time was spent in silent reading practice; 16.3 per cent of the time was spent in oral reading; 3.0 per cent of the time was spent reading to the children; and 15.0 per cent of the time was spent in transitional or non-instructional activities. Of the 23.6 per cent of formal reading instruction spent teaching comprehension, 83.6 per cent was spent on comprehension assessment; 7.6 per cent on comprehension application; 18 per cent on comprehension assignment; and 2.6 per cent on comprehension explanation. These means and standard deviations are shown in Table 4.

The result of this analysis of data shows that less than one fourth of all instructional time during formal reading instruction is used for comprehension instruction. These data again validate the previous findings that formal reading instruction does not emphasize reading comprehension. Also when reading comprehension is taught, it is generally assessed rather than taught. When teachers did ask comprehension questions, the questioning

usually went from teacher to student and then back to the teacher again. There was very little discussion which went from student to student. These results also agree with the findings of Heath (1987) and Applebee (1984) who found that formal reading instruction gives little opportunities for children to interpret what they have read. This is especially true at the first and third grade levels. Heath reported that 90 per cent of the time the one or two interpretation questions which are asked serve as the cue that the reading lesson is over. In all of the lessons observed, there was little chance for children to practice reacting to what they had read in extended prose discourse. Questions were often answered in three words or less. If clarification of a point was needed, the teacher, rather that the students, generally engaged in the talk. It must be remembered, however, that these teachers were being observed. They may have chosen to use short literal questions in order to have more control over the group and the content of the lesson while the observer was in the room.

Every teacher observed in the study used at least two reading groups and one teacher used five separate groups. It may be that by trying to find materials that fit students' reading levels, teachers are making it impossible to have long probing comprehension discussions. Because they were trying to fit three different lessons into sixty or seventy minute blocks of time, there was often not enough time to use high level discussion questions. Generally, teachers wanted to assess children's literal comprehension of what they had read. By the time this task had been accomplished, and seat work assigned to keep children busy while the teacher was working with the next group, the time was up.

When the type of comprehension instruction was analyzed, the phenomenon that Durkin (197) called "mentioning" was observed often. Teachers rarely used direct teaching or explanation when teaching comprehension. Most often they simply mentioned the skill they wanted the children to try and then assigned the workbook page which asked them to do the

skill. Much more direct teaching of phonic analysis skills than comprehension skills was observed.

The results of this study also show that approximately one fifth of the formal reading instruction time is spent in teaching word recognition skills. Because this study was done at the beginning of the school year, many of the first grade teachers were spending large amounts of time teaching phoneme/grapheme relationships. This fact might have inflated these percentages to some extent. However, even though researchers have called for more emphasis on comprehension rather than word recognition skills, teachers seem to feel that these word recognition skills are important and must be taught. It may be, as Duffy (1984) has pointed out that teachers feel more comfortable teaching word recognition skills and therefore they will spend more time teaching those skills which they feel capable of teaching.

Silent reading and oral reading continue to be used in significant amounts by classroom teachers. The first and third grade teachers used more oral reading while the fifth grade teachers used substantially more silent reading than oral reading.

Vocabulary instruction was a part of many of the reading lessons observed. Often this would be done by introducing the new words in the story at the beginning of the story. Again, little discussion of the word meaning besides a perfunctory introduction was observed. In almost all instances, however, the teacher would write these vocabulary words on the board.

The management of reading instruction seemed to be difficult for many teachers observed. Non instructional and transitional activities took up much of the valuable reading instruction time. There was great variation from teacher to teacher in these scores (note the large standard deviations); however the percentages are high enough to cause some concern about the minutes lost for instruction. Simply moving three or more reading groups to the front of the room resulted in much lost instructional time. Yet, this was the predominant

pattern used for teaching reading. Teachers often had to stop working with the reading group at the front of the room and help children in the other groups. These interruptions also used up valuable instructional time. It would appear from this data that the management of the reading groups is an important part of formal reading instruction.

Another noticeable result from this study was the very small amount of formal instructional reading time which teachers used to read to children. Even in the first grade rooms, children were not read to during formal reading instruction, although many curriculum guides suggest reading to children. It may be that teachers who do read to their children do not use the formal instructional time to do so, but they may read to their children often during other parts of the school day. However, if one judges only by the formal reading instruction time, it appears that children are not being read to by their teachers.

These results seem to tell us that practicing teachers will need help in translating research knowledge into practical working steps for teaching reading in the classroom. Although much reading research has emphasized the need for reading instruction which emphasizes comprehension skills, the teachers observed in this study have not found effective ways of teaching high level comprehension skills during formal reading instruction.

SUMMARY

The results of this study show that teachers generally spend about one fourth of the formal instructional time in reading teaching comprehension skills; eleven per cent of their time teaching vocabulary skills, 20 percent of their time teaching word recognition skills, 16 per cent of their time directing silent reading and 13 per cent of the time directing oral reading. Approximately 15 per cent of the time is spent in non instructional or transitional activities in reading. When teachers teach comprehension, they generally ask literal level questions to assess the amount of material the children have understood.

Kurth, R. J. & Kurth, L. M.
American Educational Research Association, 1987

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TABLE ONE

PER CENT OF FORMAL INSTRUCTIONAL TIME SPENT ON EACH READING ACTIVITY FOR FIRST GRADE TEACHERS

READING ACTIVITY	Mean	S.D.
a. Comprehension instruction	15	4.2
b. Vocabulary instruction	6	0.7
c. Word recognition instruction	28	6.4
d. Teacher directed oral reading	17	3.4
e. Teacher directed silent reading	14	2.1
f. Teacher read to students	6	0.2
g. Non-instructional or transitional activities	14	6.3

TABLE TWO

PER CENT OF FORMAL INSTRUCTIONAL TIME SPENT ON EACH READING ACTIVITY FOR THIRD GRADE TEACHERS

READING ACTIVITY	Mean	S.D.
a. Comprehension instruction	21	5.9
b. Vocabulary instruction	9	0.7
c. Word recognition instruction	19	4.8
d. Teacher directed oral reading	17	6.9
e. Teacher directed silent reading	15	4.8
f. Teacher read to students	3	0.9
g. Non-instructional or transitional activities	16	9.0

TABLE THREE

PER CENT OF FORMAL INSTRUCTIONAL TIME SPENT ON EACH READING ACTIVITY FOR FIFTH GRADE TEACHERS

READING ACTIVITY	Mean	S.D.
a. Comprehension instruction	35	8.6
b. Vocabulary instruction	17	4.5
c. Word recognition instruction	11	2.1
d. Teacher directed oral reading	5	1.7
e. Teacher directed silent reading	17	6.4
f. Teacher read to students	0	0.03
g. Non-instructional or transitional activities	15.0	8.8

TABLE FOUR

PER CENT OF FORMAL INSTRUCTIONAL TIME SPENT ON EACH READING ACTIVITY FOR ALL TEACHERS

READING ACTIVITY	Mean	S.D.
a. Comprehension instruction	23.6	6.1
b. Vocabulary instruction	10.6	3.4
c. Word recognition instruction	19.3	5.4
d. Teacher directed oral reading	13.0	2.4
e. Teacher directed silent reading	16.3	3.2
f. Teacher read to students	3.0	0.03
g. Non-instructional or transitional activities	15.0	8.8